Teaching Larger ESL Classes

By Jason Parry, 2012
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When is an ESL class too large?

It seems that determining whether a class is too large is not as clear cut as one might imagine. Depending on the geographical location of an ESL class, the number of students who are enrolled can vary considerably. While some contend that a class exceeding 15 students is too large (LoCastro, 2001, p. 495), in Thailand classes regularly exceed 45 students (Hayes, 1997), and in many developing countries class size regularly surpasses 100 students (Sarwar, 1996).

As noted by LoCastro (2001), it seems that when determining whether a class is too large, the answer is less a matter of the number of learners who fill the seats in a classroom, and more a matter of the individual teacher’s perception:

What class size is large or too large depends to a great extent upon the individual teacher’s perceptions and experiences. Teachers who have taught classes of 6-12 students in what might be described as elite contexts, such as company language programs or private language schools, complain when suddenly faced with a group of 22. Those who have coped with 40 in language learning classes cease to find that number large. As is well known, language education in developing countries is typically carried out in classrooms with 150-300 learners and sometimes more. (p. 494)

This point is demonstrated quite well by my recent participation at a LINC 5+ class, in fulfillment of the practicum requirement for my TESL Ontario certification. Having taught in classes ranging from six to ten students for several years, I was initially taken aback by a class with 32 active students on the register. It very soon became apparent that the size of the class had a large impact on the nature of the learning environment. According to LoCastro, class size impacts three facets of the language classroom (2001).
What problems can be associated with large classes?

Between 1986 and 1992, an extensive amount of research was completed surrounding the topic of teaching large classes. Initiated by Dick Allwright of Lancaster University, and in collaboration with researchers from various parts of the world, the result was several articles published using funding from Leeds University. In one of these papers, several teachers of large classes participated in a survey, which set out to determine the most frequent problems that they experienced in relation to class size. According to the survey results, these difficulties can be organized into three categories; pedagogical problems, management-related problems, and affective problems (LoCastro, 1989, p. 113, as cited in LoCastro, 2001). LoCastro (2001) summarizes the problems related to these three categories as follows:

**Pedagogical**

- more difficulties in carrying out speaking, reading and writing tasks
- difficulties in monitoring work and giving feedback
- problems with individualizing work
- difficulties in setting up communicative tasks
- tendency to avoid activities that are demanding to implement

**Management-Related**

- correction of large numbers of essays virtually impossible
- pair and group work often cumbersome to execute
- noise level high, affecting neighboring classes
- difficulties in attending to all students during class time
- discipline problems more acute

**Affective**

- difficulties in learning students' names
- impossibility of establishing good rapport with students
- concerns for weaker students who may get lost
- crowd phenomenon: students' not listening to teacher and other students
- problems in assessing students’ interests and moods
At each level, these difficulties were apparent in my practicum class. Suddenly, considerations were required regarding issues which had required little to no thought in my prior experience. To overcome these issues, several strategies have been suggested. While some of these strategies target one aspect of these issues directly, the majority benefit several or all of them simultaneously.

**Mitigating the problems facing larger classes**

*Reducing the marking workload*

One disadvantage of teaching a larger class which can be particularly time consuming is the volume of student work which must be corrected. There are however, several precautions which can be taken to reduce the amount of correcting which is done. Teachers can exercise control over the types of assignments they give to their students, and can decrease their workload significantly by sharing the responsibility for correction with the students. In the practicum class, the teacher would rarely collect completed work. Instead, the teacher would only supply the correct answer once, and the students would self-correct, exchange books, or write their answers on the board (Hayes, 1997, p.114). One strategy which was particularly interesting was the teacher’s approach to writing. Once students had submitted written work, a part of each composition was transferred to an overhead transparency, and submitted back to the students for group correction.

While these strategies were helpful in reducing the teacher’s workload, they also gave the students an opportunity to instantly see where they had made mistakes. By noticing where their language flaws are, they are able to ‘notice’ the correct form of the language. It has been
suggested that this can have a delayed but beneficial impact on language acquisition (see Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2002, & Ellis, 2010 for more on ‘consciousness raising’).

**Group work**

As noted above, larger classes present difficulties in setting up communicative tasks, or implementing writing, speaking, and reading tasks. Teachers find the number of students and amount of furniture constraining, fear that they are unable to deal individually with each of their students, and feel that they cannot control everyone in the room effectively (Hayes, 1997). In my practicum class, the majority of the space in the room was also obstructed by tables and chairs. Moreover, in a typical three hour lesson very little time could be allotted for individual student attention. If, for example, the entire class were devoted to individual student attention, the teacher would only be able to dedicate five and a half minutes to each student. Given the important role that output plays in the successful improvement of the target language (LoCastro, 2001) it is necessary to find a way to increase student talk time (Scrivener, 1994).

Research suggests that cooperative learning activities, which encourage small groups to work together collaboratively in the completion of a task, can be associated with “increased student talk, more varied talk, a more relaxed atmosphere, greater motivation, more negotiation of meaning, and increased amounts of comprehensible input” (Jacobs & Hall, 2010, p. 53).

That being said, group work is “not like waving a magic wand: Just say a few words and woosh! Everything is great” (Jacobs & Hall, 2010, p. 53). Developing groups effectively requires careful planning in order to be successful. Scrivener (1994) contends that while students can be organized in a variety of ways, organizing them in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class is most effective (p. 13). It seems that in the literature, four students has been agreed upon as the
most appropriate for fluent interaction (Green, Christopher & Lam, 2010, p. 226). Jacobs & Hall (2010) recommend organizing these groups randomly, while controlling for language proficiency, first language, sex, race and diligence (p. 54).

In our practicum class, groups of four were used to train virtually all four of the skills. In the majority of tasks which were completed, groups of four were chosen over individual work. This was accomplished by simply dividing the total number of students by four (8), and simple counting off that number while pointing at the students. Once this had been completed, the students were directed to a section of the room and given instructions on completing the task. Occasionally, groups which resulted from this process in a relatively high concentration of students at the same level of proficiency would be reorganized.

This technique increases the perceived amount of individual attention each student is receiving. The teacher is able to move around the classroom and quickly assess the progress of the groups. In our case, instead of assessing 32 individual students, 8 groups could be monitored. While some of these groups just required a quick check to make sure they were on track, others could be given closer guidance. Furthermore, since the students are interacting with each other, they are able to contribute to each other’s learning. This further minimizes the burden on the teacher (Hayes, 1997, p. 133).

Maintaining an effective learning environment in larger classes

In a study concerning the factors that contribute to effective English classes, teachers have consistently “judged the quality of their classes according to how far the students cooperated with each other to form single, unified, classroom groups. They clearly perceived that
any class with a positive whole-group atmosphere was ‘good’, whereas any class which lacked a spirit of group cohesion was unsatisfactory (Senior, 1997, p. 3).

In any classroom, there are a variety of factors which influence the learning environment. In fact, three levels have been identified which can effect this: “national and cultural influences on the language being learned, the education system where the language is being learned, and the immediate classroom environment” (Lewis, 2010, p. 41). While teachers are virtually powerless in influencing the first two levels, they can take steps to influence the classroom environment. As class sizes increase, so do the ways in which students can find themselves losing focus. “They fail to take part by sitting in silence, they distract other students by talking off the topic, and they provide ‘nonlanguage’ entertainment” (Lewis, 2010, 41). When this happens, teacher intervention is necessary to maintain an effective learning environment.

Dörnyei (2007) contends that a class with an effective learning environment is represented by students who have achieved a feeling of acceptance toward one another:

Acceptance involves a feeling toward another person which is non-evaluative in nature, has nothing to do with likes and dislikes, but entails an unconditional positive regard toward the individual (Rogers, 1983), acknowledging the person as a complex human being with many (possibly conflicting) values and imperfections. One of the most important characteristics of a good group is the emergence of a high level of acceptance between members that powerful enough to override even negative feelings between some. This accepting climate, then, forms the basis of a more general feature of the group, group cohesiveness. (p. 720-721)

Senior (1997) on the other hand, has defined this positive classroom climate as “bonded groups.” In her study, Senior identifies eight teaching strategies which transform language classes into bonded groups. Several of these strategies were demonstrated by the teacher in my practicum class.
Senior states that as a first step towards bonding a group of students, a teacher must break down barriers. This is accomplished by inviting the students to share information about each other, creating “shared group knowledge” (p. 6). Often during lessons, the teacher would encourage the learners to share their opinions and past experiences. While they were speaking, she would monitor individual conversations and share them with the rest of the class.

Due to continuous enrollment, the ebb and flow of new and parting students was endless. To overcome this, the teacher would always commit new names to memory immediately, devote class time to introducing new members of the course and making them feel welcome, and spend time on breaks learning as much as she could about them. By adding depth, complexity, and personality to the faces in her course, the teacher certainly was able to create cohesion between the students, minimizing the perceived magnitude of the classroom.

Senior (1997) also suggests harnessing headstrong students as a vital facet of a cohesive classroom. According to the author, there are many techniques which can be employed to handle difficult students. Teachers can ignore them, demean them in class, or find a functional role for the student which is conducive to the learning environment. The observed teacher usually utilized one of the latter two techniques. During break one afternoon, she stated that she would begin by attempting to give troublesome students leadership roles or group-maintenance tasks to quell their actions. If this didn’t work she would first approach them in private. Finally, if all else failed, she would openly reprimand them in front of the class. As noted by Senior (1997), a bonded group can very easy fall out of equilibrium if it is not maintained. As the observed teacher articulated; the positive or negative actions of one student have the potential to spread virally – and must be cultivated or eradicated as soon as they appear. According to Senior, effective teachers recognized that they play a dual role in the classroom. Although they must
remain friendly and accessible to their students, they must create some distance by accepting and exercising their position of authority (Senior, 1997, p. 4).

This dual role was also present when the teacher attempted new teaching strategies in class. Aside from implementing new teaching ideas frequently, the teacher would always justify her actions and explain her teaching goals. This has also been noted as a valuable strategy in maintaining the cohesiveness of a group and increasing motivation (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 727).

One final technique that the teacher used which has demonstrated its ability to promote a sense of community in the classroom is brainstorming. Prior to activities surrounding a new topic, the teacher would require the students to collaborate together and “pool prior linguistic knowledge” (Senior, 2006, p. 214). This information would then be collected and recorded on the board.

Aside from having pedagogical value, this exercise was also valuable socially because it brought the learners together. Students at higher and lower proficiency had the opportunity to work together, “demonstrating that the class can collectively achieve more than it can when individuals or groups work independently of one another” (Senior, 2006, p. 215).

**Minimizing large classes through individualization techniques**

One final method of decreasing the impact of larger classes is through individualization techniques. These are techniques which focus on learners as individuals, adopting a learner-centered approach to language learning. Individualization techniques are guided by five principles: Explicit teaching is not the only way that learning can take place, many different learning activities can occur simultaneously in one class, and learners have different learning styles, learn languages for different reasons and can learn from different sources even when their
goals are the same. (Sarwar, 1996, p. 32). Considering these five principles, Sarwar suggests that teachers and students must learn to reconstruct the role of teacher as facilitator and student as active agent, learners must take responsibility for their learning and learners must find contexts for learning that are meaningful to them.

Sarwar contends that even in large classes, it is possible to make these three concepts (reeducation, responsibility and relevance) a part of the learning environment.

This was represented in my practicum class by the teacher’s use of the computer lab. Once a week the students would be given the opportunity to make use of the computers to target their own language goals and weaknesses. The students could choose from several different types of CALL software, and were able to work at their own pace.

According to Sarwar, creating space for the students to work independently has many benefits. By doing this, the students are able to take responsibility for their learning due to choice, weak and high proficiency students are able to learn simultaneously and achieve their goals at their own pace, and the teacher is able to reduce her workload making class management easier (Sarwar, 1996, p. 38)

**Conclusion**

Despite having 32 students in her classroom, the teacher managed to minimize the negative effects found by LoCastro in 1989. Group work was used to limit problems at all three levels, managing correction and individualizing work was used to decrease pedagogical problems, and maintaining an effective learning environment decreased affective problems. By replicating these actions in the future, I will also be able to minimize the problems caused by larger classes.
References


